

BX  
2347.8  
A4  
C38  
1999



LETTER OF HIS HOLINESS  
POPE JOHN PAUL II  
TO THE ELDERLY

Theology Library  
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY  
AT CLAREMONT  
California



Publication No. 5-369  
United States Catholic Conference  
Washington, D.C.  
ISBN 1-57455-369-0

Text from  
LIBRERIA EDITRICE VATICANA  
Vatican City

Published in the United States, December 1999

## INDEX

“Seventy is the sum of our years...” ( <i>Ps</i> 90:10) . . . . .	1
A complex century towards a future of hope . . . . .	4
The autumn of life. . . . .	8
The elderly in Sacred Scripture . . . . .	9
Guardians of shared memory. . . . .	12
“Honor your father and mother” . . . . .	15
“You show me the path of life...” ( <i>Ps</i> 16:11) . . . . .	20
An encouragement to live life to the full . . . . .	24

## ***To my elderly brothers and sisters!***

*"Seventy is the sum of our years,  
or eighty if we are strong,  
and most of them are fruitless toil,  
for they pass quickly and we drift away" (Ps 90:10)*

1. **S**eventy years was an advanced age when the Psalmist wrote these words, and few people lived beyond it. Nowadays, thanks to medical progress and improved social and economic conditions, life expectancy has increased significantly in many parts of the world. Still, it remains true that the years pass quickly, and the gift of life, for all the effort and pain it involves, is too beautiful and precious for us ever to grow tired of it.

As an older person myself, I have felt the desire to engage in a conversation with you. I do so first of all by thanking God for the gifts and the opportunities which he has abundantly bestowed upon me up to now. In my memory I recall the stages of my life, which is bound up with the history of much of this century, and I see before me the faces of countless people, some particularly dear to me: they remind me of ordinary and extraordinary events, of happy times and of situations touched by suffering. Above all else, though, I see outstretched the provident and merciful hand of God the Father, who "cares in the best way possible for all that exists"<sup>1</sup> and

<sup>1</sup> SAINT JOHN DAMASCENE, *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, 2, 29.

who “hears us whenever we ask for anything according to his will” (1 Jn 5:14). With the Psalmist, I say to him: “You have taught me, O God, from my youth, and till the present I proclaim your wondrous deeds. And now that I am old and gray, O God, forsake me not, till I proclaim your strength to every generation that is to come” (Ps 71:17-18).

My thoughts turn with affection to all of you, dear elderly people of all languages and cultures. I am writing this letter to you in the year which the United Nations Organization has appropriately wished to dedicate to the elderly, in order to direct the attention of society as a whole to the situation of all those who, because of the burden of their years, often have to face a variety of difficult problems.

In this regard the Pontifical Council for the Laity has offered some helpful points for reflection.<sup>2</sup> In this Letter I wish simply to express my spiritual closeness to you as someone who, with the passing of the years, has come to a deeper personal understanding of this phase of life and consequently feels a need for closer contact with other people of his own age, so that we can reflect together on the things we have in common. I place all this before the eyes of God who embraces us with his love and who sustains us and guides us by his providence.

2. Dear brothers and sisters, at our age it is natural to revisit the past in order to attempt a sort of assessment. This retrospective gaze makes possible a more serene and objective evaluation of persons and situations we have

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *The Dignity of Older People and Their Mission in the Church and in the World*, Vatican City, 1998.

met along the way. The passage of time helps us to see our experiences in a clearer light and softens their painful side. Sadly, struggles and tribulations are very much a part of everyone's life. Sometimes it is a matter of problems and sufferings which can sorely test our mental and physical resistance, and perhaps even shake our faith. But experience teaches that daily difficulties, by God's grace, often contribute to people's growth and to the forging of their character.

Beyond single events, the reflection which first comes to mind has to do with the inexorable passage of time. "Time flies irretrievably," as the ancient Latin poet put it.<sup>3</sup> Man is immersed in time; he is born, lives and dies within time. Birth establishes one date, the first of his life, and death another, the last: the "alpha" and the "omega," the beginning and end of his history on earth. The Christian tradition has emphasized this by inscribing these two letters of the Greek alphabet on tombstones.

But if the life of each of us is limited and fragile, we are consoled by the thought that, by virtue of our spiritual souls, we will survive beyond death itself. Moreover, faith opens us to a "hope that does not disappoint" (cf. *Rom* 5:5), placing us before the perspective of the final resurrection. It is no coincidence that the Church, at the solemn Easter Vigil, uses the same two Greek letters in reference to Christ who lives yesterday, today and for ever: He is "the beginning and the end, Alpha and Omega. All time belongs to him and all the ages."<sup>4</sup> Human experience, although subject to time, is set by Christ against the horizon of immortality. He "became a

<sup>3</sup> VIRGIL, "*Fugit irreparabile tempus*," *Georgics* III, 284.

<sup>4</sup> *Liturgy of the Easter Vigil*.

man among men, in order to join the beginning to the end, man to God.”<sup>5</sup>

*A complex century towards a future of hope*

3. In speaking to the elderly, I know I am speaking to and about people who have made a long journey (cf. *Wis* 4:13). I am speaking to my contemporaries, and so I can readily draw an analogy from my own personal experience. Our life, dear brothers and sisters, has been situated by Providence in this twentieth century, which arrived with a complex inheritance from the past and has witnessed many extraordinary events.

Like so many other times in history, our own has registered lights and shadows. Not all has been bleak. Many positive aspects have counterbalanced the negative, or have emerged from the negative as a beneficial reaction on the part of the collective consciousness. Yet it is true too—and it would be both unjust and dangerous to forget it!—that unprecedented sufferings have affected the lives of millions and millions of people. We need but think of the conflicts which erupted on different continents as a result of territorial disputes between States or inter-ethnic hatred. Nor should we consider any less serious the conditions of extreme poverty afflicting broad segments of society in the Southern Hemisphere, or the shameful phenomenon of racial discrimination and the systematic violation of human rights found in many nations. And what are we to say of the great global conflicts?

<sup>5</sup> SAINT IRENAEUS OF LYONS, *Adversus Haereses*, IV, 20, 4.

In the first part of the century there were two of them, with casualties and destruction never previously known. The First World War killed millions of soldiers and civilians, cutting off so many human lives in adolescence or even childhood. And what of the Second World War? Breaking out after a few decades of relative peace in the world, especially in Europe, it was even more tragic than the first, with enormous consequences for the lives of nations and continents. It was *all-out war*, an unheard-of mobilization of hatred, which struck brutal blows even against defenseless civil populations and which destroyed entire generations. The toll paid on various fronts to the madness of war was incalculable; equally terrifying was the slaughter which took place in the death camps, which truly remain the Golgothas of our time.

The second half of the century was burdened for long years by the nightmare of the *cold war*, the conflict between the two great opposing ideological blocs, East and West. This was accompanied by an insane arms race and the constant threat of an atomic war capable of bringing humanity to extinction.<sup>6</sup> Thank God, that dark page of history was closed with the fall in Europe of oppressive totalitarian regimes as the result of a peaceful struggle, which relied on the weapons of truth and justice.<sup>7</sup> This in turn initiated a difficult but fruitful process of dialogue and reconciliation aimed at establishing a serene and fraternal coexistence between peoples.

But all too many nations are still very far from enjoying the benefits of peace and freedom. In recent

<sup>6</sup> Cf. POPE JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Centesimus Annus*, 18.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.



months great concern has been caused by the outbreak of violent conflict in the Balkans, which had earlier been the theater of a terrible war with ethnic undertones. Further blood was shed, further destruction took place, further hatred was nourished. Now that the clash of arms has at last ceased, thought is being given to reconstruction as the new millennium approaches. But meanwhile, on other continents too, numerous hotbeds of war continue to erupt, at times with massacres and acts of violence which are all too soon forgotten by the world press.

4. While these memories and these painful happenings sadden us, we cannot forget that our century has also seen the appearance of many positive signs which represent so many sources of hope for the Third Millennium. There has been a growing consciousness—albeit amid numerous inconsistencies, especially where respect for the life of each human being is concerned—of universal human rights, proclaimed in solemn and binding international declarations.

Moreover, there has been a continuing development of a sense of the right of peoples to self-government in the context of national and international relations, inspired by an appreciation of cultural identity together with respect of minorities. The fall of totalitarian systems, like those of Eastern Europe, has led to growth in the universal perception of the value of democracy and of the free market, although the great challenge of uniting freedom and social justice still remains.

We must also consider it a great gift of God that the world's religions are striving with ever greater determi-

nation to carry on a dialogue which would make them a fundamental factor of peace and unity in the world.

Then too, there has been an increasing recognition of the dignity of women. Undeniably there is still far to go, but the trail has been blazed. A further reason for hope is the rapid expansion of communications which, thanks to present-day technology, have made it possible to reach beyond established borders, making us feel that we are citizens of the world.

Another important area of growth is the new ecological awareness which deserves encouragement. Another source of hope is the great progress made in medicine and the contribution of science to human well-being.

There are many reasons, then, for giving thanks to God. All things considered, these final years of our century present immense potential for peace and progress. From the very adversities which our generation has experienced there comes a light which can brighten the years of our old age. Here we see the confirmation of a principle central to the Christian faith: "Tribulations not only do not destroy hope; they are its foundation."<sup>8</sup>

It is appealing, then, that, as this century and this millennium approach their twilight and the dawn of a new season for humanity can already be seen on the horizon, we should stop to meditate on how quickly time flies, not in order to resign ourselves to an inexorable fate, but rather to make full use of the years we still have before us.

<sup>8</sup> SAINT JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, *Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, 10, 2.

## *The autumn of life*

5. What is old age? At times it has been referred to *the autumn of life*—so Cicero calls it<sup>9</sup>—following the analogy suggested by the seasons and the successive phases of nature. We need but look at the changes taking place in the landscape over the course of the year, on the mountains and in the plains, in the meadows, valleys and forests, in the trees and plants. There is a close resemblance between our human bio-rhythms and the natural cycles of which we are a part.

At the same time however man is set apart from all other realities around him, precisely because he is a person. Made in the image and likeness of God, he is conscious and responsible. Even in his spiritual dimension, though, he experiences the succession of different phases, all equally fleeting. Saint Ephrem the Syrian liked to compare our life to the fingers of a hand, both to emphasize that its length is no more than a span, and to indicate that each phase of life, like the different fingers, has its particular character, and “the fingers represent the five steps by which man advances.”<sup>10</sup>

Consequently, whereas childhood and youth are the times when the human person is being formed and is completely directed towards the future, and—in coming to appreciate his own abilities—makes plans for adulthood, old age is not without its own benefits. As Saint Jerome observes, with the quieting of the passions, it

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *Cato Maior, seu De Senectute*, 19, 70.

<sup>10</sup> On “*All is vanity and affliction of spirit*,” 5-6.

"increases wisdom, and brings more mature counsels."<sup>11</sup> In a certain sense, it is the season for that wisdom which generally comes from experience, since "time is a great teacher."<sup>12</sup> The prayer of the Psalmist is well known: "Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain wisdom of heart" (*Ps* 90:12).

### *The elderly in Sacred Scripture*

6. "Youth and the dawn of life are vanity," observes the Preacher (*Ec* 11:10). The Bible does not hesitate to point out, at times with blunt realism, the fleeting nature of life and the inexorable passage of time: "Vanity of vanities..., vanity of vanities, all is vanity" (*Ec* 1:2). Who is not familiar with this stern warning of the ancient Sage? Those of us who are older, schooled as we are by experience, understand it in a special way.

Despite such wry realism, Scripture maintains a very positive vision of the value of life. Man remains for ever made "in the image of God" (cf. *Gen* 1:26), and each stage of life has its own beauty and its own tasks. Indeed, in the word of God, old age is so highly esteemed that long life is seen as a sign of divine favor (cf. *Gen* 11:10-32). In the case of Abraham, in whom the privilege of old age is stressed, this favor takes the form of a promise: "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great. I will bless those who bless you and him who curses you I will curse; in you all the families of the earth will be

<sup>11</sup> "*Auget sapientiam, dat maturiora consilia*": *Commentaria in Amos*, II, 263-264.

<sup>12</sup> CORNEILLE, *Sertorius*, Act II, Scene 4, v. 717.

blessed" (*Gen* 12:2-3). At Abraham's side is Sarah, a woman who sees her body growing old, yet experiences within the limitations of her aging flesh the power of God who makes good every human shortcoming.

Moses too was an old man when God entrusted him with the mission of leading the Chosen People out of Egypt. It was not in his youth but in his old age that, at the Lord's command, he did mighty deeds on behalf of Israel. Among other examples of elderly people in the Bible, I would mention Tobit, who humbly and courageously resolved to keep God's Law, to help the needy and to endure blindness patiently, until the angel of God intervened to set his situation aright (cf. *Tob* 3:16-17). There is also Eleazar, whose martyrdom bore witness to an exceptional generosity and strength (cf. *2 Macc* 6:18-31).

7. The New Testament, filled with the light of Christ, also contains eloquent examples of elderly people. The Gospel of Luke begins by introducing a married couple "advanced in years" (1:7): Elizabeth and Zechariah, the parents of John the Baptist. The Lord's mercy reaches out to them (cf. *Lk* 1:5-25, 39-79). Zechariah, already an old man, is told that a son will be born to him. He himself makes the point: "I am an old man and my wife is well on in years" (*Lk* 1:18). During Mary's visitation, her elderly kinswoman Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, exclaims: "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb!" (*Lk* 1:42), and when John the Baptist is born, Zechariah gives voice to the *Benedictus*. Here we see a remarkable older couple, filled with a deep spirit of prayer.

In the Temple at Jerusalem, Mary and Joseph bring Jesus to offer him to the Lord, or rather, in accordance with the Law, to redeem him as their first-born son. There they meet the aged Simeon, who had long awaited the Messiah. Taking the child in his arms, Simeon blesses God and proclaims the *Nunc Dimittis*: "Lord, now let your servant depart in peace" (*Lk* 2:29).

At Simeon's side we find Anna, a widow of eighty-four, a frequent visitor to the Temple, who now has the joy of seeing Jesus. The Evangelist tells us that "she began to praise God and spoke of the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem" (*Lk* 2:38).

Nicodemus too, a highly-regarded member of the Sanhedrin, was an elderly man. He visited Jesus by night in order not to be seen. To him the Divine Teacher reveals that he is the Son of God who has come to save the world (cf. *Jn* 3:1-21). Nicodemus appears again at the burial of Jesus, when, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, he overcomes his fear and shows himself a disciple of the Crucified Lord (cf. *Jn* 19:38-40). How reassuring are all these examples! They remind us that at every stage of life the Lord can ask each of us to contribute what talents we have. The service of the Gospel has nothing to do with age!

And what shall we say of Peter in his old age, called to bear witness to his faith by martyrdom? Jesus had once said to him: "When you were young you girded yourself and walked where you would; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go" (*Jn* 21:18). These are words which, as the Successor of Peter, touch me personally; they make me feel strongly the need to reach out

and grasp the hands of Christ, in obedience to his command: "Follow me!" (Jn 21:19).

8. As if to recapitulate the splendid images of elderly people found throughout the Bible, Psalm 92 proclaims: "The just will flourish like the palm-tree, and grow like a Lebanon cedar..., still bearing fruit when they are old, still full of sap, still green, to proclaim that the Lord is just" (vv. 13, 15-16). Echoing the Psalmist, the Apostle Paul writes in his Letter to Titus: "Bid the older men be temperate, serious, sensible, sound in faith, in love, and in patience. Bid the older women likewise to live in a way appropriate to believers...; they are to teach what is good, and so train the young women to love their husbands and children" (2:2-5).

Thus the teaching and language of the Bible present old age as a "favorable time" for bringing life to its fulfillment and, in God's plan for each person, as a time when everything comes together and enables us better to grasp life's meaning and to attain "wisdom of heart." "An honorable old age comes not with the passing of time," observes the Book of Wisdom, "nor can it be measured in terms of years; rather, understanding is the hoary crown for men, and an unsullied life, the attainment of old age" (4:8-9). Old age is the final stage of human maturity and a sign of God's blessing.

### *Guardians of shared memory*

9. In the past, great respect was shown to the elderly. "Great was once the reverence given to a hoary head,"

says Ovid, the Latin poet.<sup>13</sup> Centuries earlier, the Greek poet Phocylides had admonished: "Respect gray hair: give to the elderly sage the same signs of respect that you give your own father."<sup>14</sup>

And what of today? If we stop to consider the current situation, we see that among some peoples old age is esteemed and valued, while among others this is much less the case, due to a mentality which gives priority to immediate human usefulness and productivity. Such an attitude frequently leads to contempt for the later years of life, while older people themselves are led to wonder whether their lives are still worthwhile.

It has come to the point where euthanasia is increasingly put forward as a solution for difficult situations. Unfortunately, in recent years the idea of euthanasia has lost for many people the sense of horror which it naturally awakens in those who have a sense of respect for life. Certainly it can happen that, when grave illness involves unbearable suffering, the sick are tempted to despair and their loved ones or those responsible for their care feel compelled by a misguided compassion to consider the solution of "an easy death" as something reasonable. Here it should be kept in mind that the moral law allows the rejection of "aggressive medical treatment"<sup>15</sup> and makes obligatory only those forms of treatment which fall within the normal requirements of medical care, which in the case of terminal illness seeks primarily to alleviate pain. But euthanasia, understood as directly causing death, is another thing entirely. Regardless of

<sup>13</sup> "*Magna fuit quondam capitis reverentia cani*": Fasti, V, 57.

<sup>14</sup> *Sententiae*, XLII.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. POPE JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Evangelium Vitae*, 65.



intentions and circumstances, euthanasia is always an intrinsically evil act, a violation of God's law and an offense against the dignity of the human person.<sup>16</sup>

10. There is an urgent need to recover a correct perspective on life as a whole. The correct perspective is that of eternity, for which life at every phase is a meaningful preparation. Old age too has a proper role to play in this process of gradual maturing along the path to eternity. And this process of maturing cannot but benefit the larger society of which the elderly person is a part.

Elderly people help us to see human affairs with greater wisdom, because life's vicissitudes have brought them knowledge and maturity. They are the guardians of our collective memory, and thus the privileged interpreters of that body of ideals and common values which support and guide life in society. To exclude the elderly is in a sense to deny the past, in which the present is firmly rooted, in the name of a modernity without memory. Precisely because of their mature experience, the elderly are able to offer young people precious advice and guidance.

In view of all this, the signs of human frailty which are clearly connected with advanced age become a summons to the mutual dependence and indispensable solidarity which link the different generations, inasmuch as every person needs others and draws enrichment from the gifts and charisms of all.

Here the reflections of a poet dear to me are pertinent: "It is not the future alone which is eternal, not the future alone!... Indeed, the past too is the age of eternity:

<sup>16</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

Nothing which has already happened will come back today as it was... It will return, but as Idea; it will not return as itself."<sup>17</sup>

*"Honor your father and mother"*

11. Why then should we not continue to give the elderly the respect which the sound traditions of many cultures on every continent have prized so highly? For peoples influenced by the Bible, the point of reference through the centuries has been the commandment of the Decalogue: "Honor your father and mother," a duty which for that matter is universally recognized. The full and consistent application of this commandment has not only been a source of the love of children for their parents, but it has also forged the strong link which exists between the generations. Where this commandment is accepted and faithfully observed, there is little danger that older people will be regarded as a useless and troublesome burden.

The same commandment also teaches respect for those who have gone before us and for all the good which they have done: the words "father and mother" point to the past, to the bond between generations which makes possible the very existence of a people. In the two versions found in the Bible (cf. *Ex* 20:2-17; *Dt* 5:6-21), this divine commandment is the first of those inscribed on the second Tablet of the Law, which deals with the duties of human beings towards one another and towards society. Furthermore, it is the only commandment to which a promise is attached: "Honor your father and mother, so

<sup>17</sup> C.K. NORWID, *Nie tylko przyszłość ...*, *Post Scriptum*, I, vv. 1-4.

that your days in the land which the Lord your God gives you may be long" (*Ex* 20:12; cf. *Dt* 5:16).

12. "Rise in the presence of one with gray hair; honor the person of the older man" (*Lev* 19:32). Honoring older people involves a threefold duty: welcoming them, helping them and making good use of their qualities. In many places this happens almost spontaneously, as the result of long-standing custom. Elsewhere, and especially in the more economically advanced nations, there needs to be a reversal of the current trend, to ensure that elderly people can grow old with dignity, without having to fear that they will end up no longer counting for anything. There must be a growing conviction that a fully human civilization shows respect and love for the elderly, so that despite their diminishing strength they feel a vital part of society. Cicero himself noted that "the burden of age is lighter for those who feel respected and loved by the young."<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, while the human spirit has some part in the process of bodily aging, in some way it remains ever young if it is constantly turned towards eternity. This experience of enduring youthfulness becomes all the more powerful when to the inner witness of a good conscience is joined the sympathetic concern and grateful affection of loved ones. Then, as Saint Gregory of Nazianzus writes, a man "will not grow old in spirit, but will accept dissolution as the moment fixed for the freedom which must come. Gently he will cross into the

<sup>18</sup> "*Leuior fit senectus, eorum qui a iuventute coluntur et diliguntur,*" *Cato Maior, seu De Senectute*, 8, 26.

beyond, where there is neither youth nor old age, but where all are perfect in spiritual maturity.”<sup>19</sup>

We are all familiar with examples of elderly people who remain amazingly youthful and vigorous in spirit. Those coming into contact with them find their words an inspiration and their example a source of comfort. May society use to their full potential those elderly people who in some parts of the world—I think especially of Africa—are rightly esteemed as “living encyclopedias” of wisdom, guardians of an inestimable treasure of human and spiritual experiences. While they tend to need physical assistance, it is equally true that in their old age the elderly are able to offer guidance and support to young people as they face the future and prepare to set out along life’s paths.

While speaking of older people, I would also say a word to the young, to invite them to remain close to the elderly. Dear young people, I urge you to do this with great love and generosity. Older people can give you much more than you can imagine. The Book of Sirach offers this advice: “Do not disregard what older people say, because they too have learned from their parents” (8:9); “Attend the meetings with older people. Is there one who is wise? Spend time with him” (6:34); for “wisdom is becoming to the elderly” (25:5).

13. The Christian community can receive much from the serene presence of older people. I think first of all in terms of evangelization: its effectiveness does not depend principally on technical expertise. In how many families are grandchildren taught the rudiments of the faith by

<sup>19</sup> *Discourse upon Returning from the Country*, 11.

their grandparents! There are many other areas where the elderly can make a beneficial contribution. The Spirit acts as and where he wills, and quite frequently he employs human means which seem of little account in the eyes of the world. How many people find understanding and comfort from elderly people who may be lonely or ill and yet are able to instill courage by their loving advice, their silent prayers, or their witness of suffering borne with patient acceptance! At the very time when their physical energies and their level of activity are decreasing, these brothers and sisters of ours become all the more precious in the mysterious plan of Providence.

In addition to the obvious psychological need of the elderly themselves, the most natural place to spend one's old age continues to be the environment in which one feels most "at home," among family members, acquaintances and friends, where one can still make oneself useful. As the number of older people increases, keeping pace with the rise in average life expectancy, it will become more and more important to promote a widespread attitude of acceptance and appreciation of the elderly, and not relegate them to the fringes. The ideal is still for the elderly to remain within the family, with the guarantee of effective social assistance for the greater needs which age or illness entail.

On the other hand, there are situations where circumstances suggest or demand that they be admitted to "homes for the elderly" where they can enjoy the company of others and receive specialized care. Such institutions are indeed praiseworthy, and experience shows that they can provide a valuable service when they are

inspired not only by organizational efficiency but also by loving concern. Everything becomes easier when each elderly resident is helped by family, friends and parish communities to feel loved and still useful to society. How can we fail to mention here, with admiration and gratitude, the Religious Congregations and volunteer groups specifically devoted to the care of the aged, especially the poor, the abandoned and those in difficulty?

Dear elderly friends who feel insecure because of ill health or other circumstances, I assure you of my closeness and affection. When God permits us to suffer because of illness, loneliness or other reasons associated with old age, he always gives us the grace and strength to unite ourselves with greater love to the sacrifice of his Son and to share ever more fully in his plan of salvation. Let us be convinced of this: he is our Father, a Father rich in love and mercy!

My thoughts turn in a special way to you, widows and widowers, who find yourselves alone in the final part of your lives; to you, elderly men and women Religious, who for long years have faithfully served the cause of the Kingdom of Heaven; and to you, dear brother Priests and Bishops, who, for reasons of age, no longer have direct responsibility for pastoral ministry. The Church still needs you. She appreciates the services which you may wish to provide in many areas of the apostolate; she counts on the support of your longer periods of prayer; she counts on your advice born of experience, and she is enriched by your daily witness to the Gospel.

*"You show me the path of life,  
in your presence there is fullness of life" (Ps 16:11)*

14. It is natural that, as the years pass, we should increasingly consider our "twilight." If nothing else, we are reminded of it by the very fact that the ranks of our family members, friends and acquaintances grow ever thinner; we become aware of this in a number of ways, when for example we attend family reunions, gatherings of our childhood friends, classmates from school and university, or former colleagues from the military or the seminary. The line separating life and death runs through our communities and moves inexorably nearer to each of us. If life is a pilgrimage towards our heavenly home, then old age is the most natural time to look towards the threshold of eternity.

And yet, even we elderly people find it hard to resign ourselves to the prospect of making this passage. In our human condition touched by sin, death presents a certain dark side which cannot but bring sadness and fear. How could it be otherwise? Man has been made for life, whereas death—as Scripture tells us from its very first pages (cf. *Gen 2-3*)—was not a part of God's original plan but came about as a consequence of sin, as a result of "the devil's envy" (*Wis 2:24*). It is thus understandable why, when faced with this dark reality, man instinctively rebels. In this regard it is significant that Jesus, "who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin" (*Heb 4:15*), also experienced fear in the face of death: "Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me" (*Mt 26:39*). How can we forget his tears at the tomb

of his friend Lazarus, despite the fact that he was about to raise him from the dead (cf. *Jn* 11:35)?

However rationally comprehensible death may be from a biological standpoint, it is not possible to experience it as something "natural." This would contradict man's deepest instincts. As the Council observed: "It is in the face of death that the riddle of human existence becomes most acute. Not only is man tormented by pain and by the advancing deterioration of his body, but even more so by a dread of perpetual extinction."<sup>20</sup> This anguish would indeed be inconsolable were death complete destruction, the end of everything. Death thus forces men and women to ask themselves fundamental questions about the meaning of life itself. What is on the other side of the shadowy wall of death? Does death represent the definitive end of life or does something lie beyond it?

15. Human history, from the most ancient times down to our own day, has provided a number of simplistic answers which limit life to what we experience on earth. In the Old Testament itself, certain passages in the Book of Ecclesiastes seem to present old age as a building in ruins and death as its final and utter destruction (cf. 12:1-7). But precisely against the backdrop of these pessimistic attitudes there shines forth the hope-filled outlook present in revelation as a whole and particularly in the Gospel: "God is not God of the dead, but of the living" (cf. *Lk* 20:38). The Apostle Paul affirms that God, who gives life to the dead (cf. *Rom* 4:17), will also give

<sup>20</sup> SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 18.



life to our mortal bodies (cf. *ibid.*, 8:11). And Jesus says of himself: "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die" (*Jn* 11:25-26).

Christ, having crossed the threshold of death, has revealed the life which lies beyond this frontier, in that uncharted "territory" which is eternity. He is the first witness of eternal life; in him human hope is shown to be filled with immortality. "The sadness of death gives way to the bright promise of immortality."<sup>21</sup> These words, which the Church's Liturgy offers as a consolation to believers as they bid farewell to their loved ones, are followed by a proclamation of hope: "Lord, for your faithful people life is changed, not ended. When the body of our earthly dwelling lies in death we gain an everlasting dwelling place in heaven."<sup>22</sup> In Christ, death—tragic and disconcerting as it is—is redeemed and transformed; it is even revealed as a "sister" who leads us to the arms of our Father.<sup>23</sup>

16. Faith thus illuminates the mystery of death and brings serenity to old age, now no longer considered and lived passively as the expectation of a calamity but rather as a promise-filled approach to the goal of full maturity. These are years to be lived with a sense of trusting abandonment into the hands of God, our provident and merciful Father. It is a time to be used creatively for deepening

<sup>21</sup> *Roman Missal*, Preface of Christian Death I.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Cf. SAINT FRANCIS OF ASSISI, *Canticle of the Creatures*.

our spiritual life through more fervent prayer and commitment to the service of our brothers and sisters in charity.

Most commendable then are all those social programs enabling the elderly to continue to attend to their physical well-being, their intellectual development and their personal relationships, as well as those enabling them to make themselves useful and to put their time, talents and experience at the service of others. In this way the capacity to enjoy life as God's primordial gift is preserved and increases. Such a capacity to enjoy life in no way conflicts with that desire for eternity which grows within people of deep spiritual experience, as the lives of the saints bear witness.

Here the Gospel reminds us of the words of the aged Simeon, who says he is ready to die now that he has held in his arms the long-awaited Messiah: "Lord, now you let your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation" (*Lk* 2:29-30). The Apostle Paul felt torn between the desire to continue living in order to preach the Gospel, and the desire "to depart and be with Christ" (*Phil* 1:23). Saint Ignatius of Antioch, joyfully going to his martyrdom, said that he could hear within him the voice of the Spirit, like living "water" welling up inside of him and whispering the invitation: "Come to the Father."<sup>24</sup> These examples could be multiplied. They cast no doubt whatsoever on the value of earthly life, which is beautiful despite its limitations and sufferings, and which ought to be lived to its very end. At the same time they remind us that earthly life is not the ultimate value, in such a way that the twilight of

<sup>24</sup> *Letter to the Romans*, 7, 2.

life can be seen—from a Christian perspective—as a “passage,” a bridge between one life and another, between the fragile and uncertain joy of this earth to that fullness of joy which the Lord holds in store for his faithful servants: “Enter into the joy of your master” (Mt 25:21).

*An encouragement to live life to the full*

17. In this spirit, dear elderly brothers and sisters, as I encourage each of you to live with serenity the years that the Lord has granted you, I feel a spontaneous desire to share fully with you my own feelings at this point of my life, after more than twenty years of ministry on the throne of Peter and as we await the arrival, now imminent, of the Third Millennium. Despite the limitations brought on by age, I continue to enjoy life. For this I thank the Lord. It is wonderful to be able to give oneself to the very end for the sake of the Kingdom of God!

At the same time, I find great peace in thinking of the time when the Lord will call me: from life to life! And so I often find myself saying, with no trace of melancholy, a prayer recited by priests after the celebration of the Eucharist: *In hora mortis meae voca me, et iube me venire ad te*—at the hour of my death, call me and bid me come to you. This is the prayer of Christian hope, which in no way detracts from the joy of the present, while entrusting the future to God’s gracious and loving care.

18. “*Iube me venire ad te!*”: this is the deepest yearning of the human heart, even in those who are not conscious of it.

Grant, O Lord of life, that we may be ever vividly aware of this and that we may savor every season of our lives as a gift filled with promise for the future.

Grant that we may lovingly accept your will, and place ourselves each day in your merciful hands.

And when the moment of our definitive "passage" comes, grant that we may face it with serenity, without regret for what we shall leave behind. For in meeting you, after having sought you for so long, we shall find once more every authentic good which we have known here on earth, in the company of all who have gone before us marked with the sign of faith and hope.

Mary, Mother of pilgrim humanity, pray for us "now and at the hour of our death." Keep us ever close to Jesus, your beloved Son and our brother, the Lord of life and glory.

Amen!

From the Vatican, 1 October 1999.

*Joannes Paulus II*